

Dam overflow floods
100 Myanmar villages

AFP, Bago

Monsoon rains caused a central Myanmar's Bago region dam to overflow early yesterday, inundating about 100 villages and blocking the country's biggest highway, a government official said. No casualties have been reported but thousands were displaced and took shelter in temporary camps.

Suicide car bomber
kills 11 in Iraq

AFP, Ramadi

A suicide bomber blew up a vehicle in the town of Al-Qaim in western Iraq yesterday, killing at least 11 people, five of them security personnel, police said. The 9:00 am bombing at a checkpoint on the outskirts of Al-Qaim also wounded 16 people -- 11 civilians and five security personnel. No one claimed responsibility for the attack.

UN schools for
Palestinians reopen

AFP, Gaza City

Tens of thousands of Palestinian children returned to UN-run schools yesterday after the summer holidays, though major US cuts have thrown their funding into jeopardy beyond next month. The UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine refugees (UNRWA) said all 711 schools it runs for 526,000 pupils in Gaza and the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria would reopen in the next few days.

New Pak PM Khan
to skip UNGA meet

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistan's new Prime Minister Imran Khan will skip next month's United Nations General Assembly session to focus his attention on the country's economy, said his foreign minister. Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi will head the Pakistani delegation at 73rd UN General Assembly session set to open on September 18.

US, Russia in war of words

Washington, Moscow trade warnings over possible chemical attack in Idlib

REUTERS, Al Jazeera

Russia has deployed a dozen warships to the Mediterranean Sea in what a Russian newspaper on Tuesday called Moscow's largest naval buildup since it entered the Syrian conflict in 2015.

The reinforcement comes as Russia's ally, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, is believed to be considering a major assault on the last rebel-held enclave in northern Idlib province, which is home to nearly three million people and has a large al-Qaeda presence in addition to several Syrian rebel groups.

It borders Turkey, which fears an offensive may trigger a humanitarian and security catastrophe.

Upping the ante, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov yesterday described Idlib militants as a "festering abscess" that needed

to be liquidated.

Speaking after talks with his Saudi counterpart Adel bin Ahmed Al-Jubeir in Moscow, Lavrov also told reporters that there was a political understanding between Turkey and Russia on the need to distinguish between the Syrian opposition and people he described as terrorists in Idlib Province.

Russia has accused the United States of building up its own forces in the Middle East in preparation for a possible strike on Syrian government forces.

The Izvestia newspaper said Russia had gathered its largest naval presence in the Mediterranean since it intervened in Syria in 2015 and turned the war's tide in Assad's favour.

The force included 10 vessels, most of them armed with long-range Kalibr cruise missiles,

Izvestia wrote, adding more ships were on the way. Two submarines had also been deployed.

The US on Tuesday warned the Russian and Syrian governments against chemical weapon use in Syria.

State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert said the US "will respond to any verified chemical weapons use in Idlib or elsewhere in Syria ... in a swift and appropriate manner".

The comments came as Russia again accused Syrian rebels of preparing a chemical attack that Moscow said will be used to justify a Western strike against Syrian troops.

Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov said on Tuesday an al-Qaeda-linked group is preparing the attack in Idlib.

Last week, Russian Major-General Alexei Tsygankov, who

heads the centre for reconciliation of warring parties in Syria, claimed British special services were involved in plans for the alleged provocation.

That brought a heated denial from Britain's United Nations Ambassador, Karen Pierce, during a Security Council session on the humanitarian situation in Syria held on Tuesday.

"Even by the egregious standards of Russian propaganda, this is an extraordinary allegation," she said. "It is wholly untrue."

Russia's UN Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia said: "If the defence ministry says something, then it says that based on concrete facts".

The UN director of humanitarian operations warned a major offensive in Idlib "has the potential to create a humanitarian emergency at a scale not yet seen" in the seven-year civil war.



WAR IN SYRIA

Moscow vows to liquidate militants in Idlib, deploys a dozen warships to the Mediterranean Sea

(From Left, clockwise) Russian Navy's frigate Pytliviy and US Navy destroyer USS Carney sail in the Bosphorus, on their way to the Mediterranean Sea, on August 24, 2018 and last Monday respectively; and Turkish forces are seen yesterday in a convoy on a main highway between Damascus and Aleppo, near the town of Saraqib in Syria's northern Idlib province.

PHOTO: REUTERS, AFP



'We have failed the Rohingya'

Says UN goodwill ambassador Cate Blanchett at UNSC meet

AP, United Nations

Oscar-winning actress Cate Blanchett told the UN Security Council on Tuesday that nothing prepared her for "the extent and depth of suffering" she saw when she visited camps in Bangladesh for Rohingya Muslim refugees who fled a violent crackdown by Myanmar's military.

In her very different role as a goodwill ambassador for the UN refugee agency, Blanchett said she heard "gut-wrenching accounts" of torture, rape, people seeing loved ones killed before their eyes, and children thrown into fire and burned alive.

"I am a mother, and I saw my children in the eyes of every single refugee child I met," she said. "I saw myself in every parent. How can any mother endure seeing her child thrown into a fire?"

The two-time Academy Award winner said: "Their experiences will never leave me."

Blanchett, who visited refugee camps in Bangladesh in March, recounted stories that were told to her and said it was important to recall that last year wasn't the first attack on the Rohingya.

In 1978, she said, Gul Zahar told her she was a young woman among 200,000 Rohingya refugees who streamed into Bangladesh "fleeing brutality and widespread abuse." In 1992, Gul was again among another 250,000 stateless Rohingya who sought safety in Bangladesh. And now at age 90, Blanchett said, Gul is "sadly" a refugee again living in poverty in Bangladesh "with the sole wish that her great grandchildren will have a better future."

"The need for this future to transpire inside Myanmar has never been more urgent," Blanchett said. "If we fail to act now, Gul's grandchildren, like thousands of others, will be unable to escape this relentless cycle that generations of Rohingya have experienced."

The Australian actress said women who were raped by Myanmar security forces are now giving birth to children who are not only stateless but "are likely to carry this stigma for the rest of these lives."

She urged support for the refugees and Bangladeshi host communities, and she implored the Security Council to help the Rohingya return with "a clear pathway to full citizenship."

"We have failed the Rohingya before," Blanchett said. "Please, let us not fail them again."

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Will scrap nuke deal if needed

Says Iran's Khamenei as he orders Rouhani, govt to fix economic problems after return of US sanctions

AFP, Tehran

Iran's supreme leader warned yesterday the country could abandon its nuclear deal with world powers if it no longer served its interests, even as economic and political pressure mounted on the government.

"Naturally, if we reach the conclusion that (the nuclear deal) is no longer maintaining our national interests, we will put it aside," Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said in a meeting with the cabinet, according to his website.

He said Iran must not "pin its hopes" on Europe, despite European efforts to salvage the nuclear deal following the withdrawal of the United States.

The government of President Hassan Rouhani has been battered by the return of US sanctions, which has triggered a rapid departure of foreign firms and ended his hopes of attracting large-scale investment.

His political enemies are circling, with parliament announcing that two more of his ministers could be impeached in the coming days.

The labour and economy ministers have already been sacked by parliament this month and motions have been accepted to vote on impeaching his industries and educa-

tion ministers in the coming days.

Khamenei insisted the political tumult was a sign of the strength of Iran's democracy.

He praised the tough questioning Rouhani received in parliament on Tuesday as "a glorious show of the power of the Islamic republic and the self-confidence of officials."

Tuesday's grilling in parliament was the first for Rouhani in five years as president, and lawmakers slammed his handling of five economic issues.

Meanwhile, Iran's intelligence minister said "dozens of spies" had been arrested as part of a crackdown on espionage and dual nationals and alluded to an agent Iran had placed in the Israeli government, Iranian media reported yesterday.

Intelligence Minister Mahmoud Alavi did not provide details of the "dozens of spies" in the interview televised late on Tuesday.

He said Iran had planted the agent "in the cabinet of a country that has a very strong intelligence service".

The conservative Tasnim news agency said this was a reference to Gonen Segev, a former Israeli energy and infrastructure minister who was charged with spying by a Jerusalem court last month.

Europe cannot save nuclear deal, help economy: Khamenei

Tehran 'planted spy in Israeli cabinet': Iran's intelligence minister

CLASHES OVER PANCHAYAT BOARDS

Death toll rises to 10 in West Bengal

HINDUSTAN TIMES ONLINE

At least four people were killed and 17 injured in two districts of West Bengal late on Tuesday in clashes that erupted over the formation of panchayat boards following the elections to the rural bodies in mid-May, taking the death toll to ten since August 25, officials said yesterday.

Three men died in North 24 Parganas' Amdanga block, about 35km from Kolkata, in clashes which broke out allegedly between two parties. Nasib Halder, 25, and Kuddus Ghani, 33, were members of ruling Trinamool Congress and Mujaffar Ahmed, 31, was a Communist Party of India (Marxist) worker.

Trinamool Congress worker Khairul Haque, a resident of North Dinajpur district, was admitted to a hospital in Siliguri's North Bengal Medical College on Tuesday with injuries and died later in the night.

"CPI(M)-backed goons launched the attacks in Amdanga. I was told they even have assault rifles in their possession. We will ask the police to conduct searches in every house to unearth these weapons," alleged state food and supplies minister Jyotipriyo Mullick.

"Power connection was severed to take advantage of the darkness and mount the attacks," said the local MLA.



Indian activists of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) New Democracy shout slogans during a protest against the arrest of poet and activist Varavara Rao in Hyderabad, yesterday. Story on page 16.

PHOTO: AFP

LANKA CIVIL WAR

Court orders arrest of top military officer

AFP, Colombo

A court yesterday ordered the arrest of Sri Lanka's top military officer in connection with the abduction and murder of 11 people during the island's civil war.

Colombo Fort magistrate Lanka Jayaratne directed police to detain Admiral Ravindra Wijegunaratne, Chief of the Defence Staff, for allegedly helping the main person accused in the killings escape prosecution.

Chandana Prasad Hettiarachchi, a navy intelligence officer, was accused of leading a hit squad that kidnapped 11 young men between 2008 and 2009 during the final stages of the war.

They are believed to have been murdered while being illegally held by the navy. Their bodies were never found.

Hettiarachchi was arrested earlier this month in Colombo after a months-long manhunt that saw an alert issued worldwide.

There have been persistent allegations that senior military personnel and regime figures loyal to then-president Mahinda Rajapakse were responsible for a number of high-profile murders.

Several military intelligence officers are facing prosecution in connection with the assassination of a prominent newspaper editor and for orchestrating attacks on other journalists and dissidents during Rajapakse's rule that ended in January 2015.

Troops crushed Tamil separatists known as the Tamil Tigers in 2009, ending the decades-long civil war.

But the final days of the government offensive, spearheaded by Rajapakse, were marked by allegations of major rights violations. A former UN official has claimed that up to 40,000 civilians may have been killed in the final stages of the war.



US support to coalition in Yemen not unconditional

Says Pentagon chief

AFP, Washington

US support for the Saudi-led coalition fighting in Yemen is not "unconditional," Defense Secretary Jim Mattis said Tuesday, as he defended America's ongoing role in the war.

The Pentagon chief's comments came the same day as UN investigators said they had reasonable grounds to believe that warring parties in Yemen may have committed a "substantial number" of violations of humanitarian law that could amount to "war crimes."

The US provides weapons, aerial refueling to jets, intelligence and targeting information to the Saudi-led coalition that is fighting Huthi rebels in Yemen.

"Our conduct there is to try and keep the human cost of innocents being killed accidentally to the absolute minimum," Mattis told Pentagon reporters. "That is our goal where we engage with the coalition."

But, he said, US support has its limits. "It is not unconditional," he said, noting that the coalition must do "everything humanly possible to avoid any innocent loss of life, and they support the UN-brokered peace process."

The devastating Yemen conflict has left nearly 10,000 people dead since March 2015, when the Saudi-led coalition intervened to fight Huthi rebels closing in on the last bastion of President Mansour Hadi's government.